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# "It's Your Misfortune And None Of My Own": A New History Of The American West



## Synopsis

A centerpiece of the New History of the American West, this book embodies the theme that, as succeeding groups have occupied the American West and shaped the land, they have done so without regard for present inhabitants. Like the cowboy herding the dogies, they have cared little about the cost their activities imposed on others; what has mattered is the immediate benefit they have derived from their transformation of the land. Drawing on a recent flowering of scholarship on the western environment, western gender relations, minority history, and urban and labor history, as well as on more traditional western sources, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own* is about the creation of the region rather than the vanishing of the frontier. Richard White tells how the various parts of the West—its distinct environments, its metropolitan areas and vast hinterlands, the various ethnic and racial groups and classes—are held together by a series of historical relationships that are developed over time. Widespread aridity and a common geographical location between the Missouri River and the Pacific Ocean would have provided but weak regional ties if other stronger relationships had not been created. A common dependence on the deferral government and common roots in a largely extractive and service-based economy were formative influences on western states and territories. A dual labor system based on race and the existence of minority groups with distinctive legal status have helped further define the region. Patterns of political participation and political organization have proved enduring. Together, these relationships among people, and between people and place, have made the West a historical creation and a distinctive region. From Europeans contact and subsequent Anglo-American conquest, through the civil-rights movement, the energy crisis, and the current reconstructing of the national and world economies, the West has remained a distinctive section in a much larger nation. In the American imagination the West still embodies possibilities inherent in the vastness and beauty of the place itself. But, Richard White explains, the possibilities many imagined for themselves have yielded to the possibilities seized by others. Many who thought themselves cowboys have in the end turned out to be dogies. *~ ~*

## Book Information

Paperback: 684 pages

Publisher: University of Oklahoma Press; Reprint edition (September 15, 1993)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0806125675

ISBN-13: 978-0806125671

Product Dimensions: 6.8 x 1.3 x 10 inches

Shipping Weight: 2.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.5 out of 5 stars 7 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #205,021 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #23 in [Books > History > Americas > Canada > Province & Local](#) #1845 in [Books > Textbooks > Humanities > History > United States](#) #2992 in [Books > History > Americas > United States > State & Local](#)

## Customer Reviews

"An excellent new synthesis of Western history...[White] is a lively, graceful writer...and he tells a story very different from the traditional picture of the progress of Anglo-American civilization, but no less compelling." [New York Times Book Review](#)"[White] has produced an exhaustively researched and near encyclopedic excursion into our Western past, and he pulls together an enormous amount of information about the social and political forces that shaped and continue to shape the most compelling region of our nation." [Los Angeles Times](#)"The book is nearly all-embracing in scope: in well-written and densely packed chapters organized topically, White takes us from the times of early Spanish explorers in the 1500s to the years of the Ronald Reagan presidency." [Pacific Northwest Quarterly](#)"Long on incisive interpretation, shorter on narrative, but vivid in details, this book will reach and enrich the understanding of a wide readership." [Choice](#)"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own is steadfastly a history of the West as a region, and Euro-American expansion is treated as one of the several forces making that region's history. White's book is highly original, certainly the most innovative and challenging overview of western history written in the last couple of generations. His writing is vivid, straightforward, and occasionally quite entertaining, and he lavishes the reader with particulars, providing fine examples and case studies to argue his points. An exceptionally perceptive, boldly argued, and persuasive grand tour of the western past." [Elliot West, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville](#)"This book represents a striking contrast to the conventional view of western history and the usual western history text. It will be a major contribution to the field and will enjoy a wide readership. White has a clear grasp of the available literature and seizes upon it to drive home main points about the nature of the western experience. He does so forcefully and pointedly. It is a book born of affection and of understanding for this remarkable part of America." [Peter Iverson, Arizona State University](#)

Richard White, Margaret Byrne Professor of American History at Stanford University, is author of 'Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West' and 'Remembering Ahanagan: Storytelling in a Family's Past'.

Richard White's work reexamines the American Western History much in the same format as Patty Limerick has. Rather than seeing the United States movement across the continent as a political/military or even industrial happening it strives to write a history of the "place" known as the American West. In doing so, the author's comprehensive history chronicles in 634 pages European arrival in the American West to the modern era 1980s. The author's work reminds me of that geography theme- human and environmental interaction. He points to how the Spain's introduction of the horse altered life for the plains Indians. (21) Later in chapter five he addresses how various geological surveys and the changed what was known of the west. (135) He illustrates the challenges that the settlers experienced in the face of 164-degree changes over the course of one year in the severe Montana climate. (229) No history on the American west would be complete with some time devoted to the railroad as White does on page 247 in the chapter entitled "the West and the World Economy." Yet White's perspective is that of economics rather than merely industrial expansion and conquest. In doing so the railroads were not the subject history revolved around yet one part of the economic transformation occurring in the American West. Interesting and perhaps obvious to a historian of the West appears on page 142 when the author states that the catalyst for most of the legal changes to the land system stems from the 1862 Homestead, Pacific Railroad Grant, and Morrill Acts passed by Congress during the Civil War. Perhaps the author could have better stated that it was the war and the resulting absence of Southern representation that enabled this long debated westward movement legislation to clear the gridlock of antebellum politics. White in the spirit of Limerick and other "New Western Historians" does an excellent job of illustrating a multicultural, multiethnic, multi-political, and gender rich history of the land west of Missouri. At numerous occasions, he interjects the diversity of the American West throughout its history. Examples of this are the section on Red Cloud and his white-Indian culture, (105) the portrayal of Mexican-American migration during the war years, (504) the birth of Kearney's Workingmen's Party centered around nativist attitudes of the late nineteenth century, (334) and most memorable melting pot that was the California Gold Rush. (189) It was interesting to see how White's work influenced a later work - Susan Lee Johnson's *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (2000) which focused entirely on such issues over one period of Western History and did it so well it garnished a

Bancroft Prize. "The Imagined West" is White's final chapter and in it, the author demystifies and explains how the History of West has taken on a sort of folklore quality. Naturally, the fictional efforts of Buffalo Bill (614) and Owen Wister (621) are attributed for part of the myths about the West. However in addition, are real actors in this history that appear bigger than life such as George Armstrong Custer (625) and Kit Carson (616). One criticism of the author is that he, like most "New Western Historians," ignores the impact of Turner's Thesis unless it is to debunk it, which by the way is easily done. Yet an argument can be made that Turner was correct in that the West was a "place" unique to the American Experience unlike anything in Europe and special in its own right. One would think if an author was writing about the West, as a "place" credit would be given to the historian famous for this identification. Although White never mentions Turner this is done mildly with the citation by Henry Thoreau on page 620. In terms of style, the book is an easy and quick read despite its behemoth size. Most frustrating is the author's lack of notes. In five years of graduate school, the reader has yet to come across a book the void of any footnote or endnotes. Furthermore, the publisher - Oklahoma Press is probably the premier research university on this subject and noted for quality historical documentation. The reader was subjected to never-ending frustration due to this omission. Where is White get information for example, "As one historian of expansion has noted, the United States had acquired 100-horsepower empire, but only a 10-horsepower government to manage it. . ." ? (84) Another example centers around statistical information, "The death rate on the trail was about 3 percent, or about 10,000 people in all, compared to a death rate of 2.5 percent in America society as a whole." (199) Had a note be added it only would lend the author greater credibility. On the other hand, White's unorthodox historical approach pays off when he releases a zinger like, "The Texans accomplished all this amidst revolutionary maneuverings more appropriate to Groucho than Karl Marx." (68)

Just received the book and haven't read it yet. Just want to report that this book may have \_the\_ worst cover ever. I have not done exhaustive research but in my experience this is among the worst I've seen. I have to wonder whether the original was done on black velvet. Word to the wise...need a graphic designer, get a graphic designer. I will revise the star rating after having read the book - if I can get past the cover. Update: I stand by my critique of the cover. I made my own and pasted it over the original. Now on to the book. I like the writing and the broad view the author takes on this often controversial subject. I'm only about 1/4 way through the book - it is not a weekend read - but so far so good. The history encompassed is wider ranging than used to be typical of Western histories. I am a reader of history but not a historian. This book is probably among those called

revisionist history. There are critiques against revisionism as being a politically correct expedient. I think these new histories attempt to tell the story of what really happened and to do so from a wider point of view. The prime example is of course the treatment of the Indians at the hands of the Europeans. There is much we weren't told in history class and books such as these help to round out and make more balanced the reporting of the West. In many contemporary writings of the American West the authors talk about the how the myth of the West flies in the face of what actually happened. This book is among those that are attempting to set the record straight.

Richard White, author of *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*, was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1947. He received his B.A. at the University of California - Santa Cruz in 1969 which was followed by the completion of his M.A. (1972) and Ph.D. (1975) at the University of Washington. He has had a long and illustrious career starting with an immediate professorship and a fellow in history (1975-76) at the Center for the History of the American Indian, Newbery Library. From 1976-80 he was an assistant professor of history at Michigan State University and, from 1990-1998, a professor of history at the University of Washington. From 1999 to the present he is a professor of history at Stanford University. With memberships in the Organization of American Historians and the American Society of Ethnohistory he is the recipient of various awards including: the Albert B. Corey Prize, Rawley Prize and the Francis Parkman Prize. He was also nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1992. Some of his other works include: *Land Use, Environment, and Social Change: The Shaping of Island County, Washington*, University of Washington Press (Seattle, WA), 1980. *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*, Cambridge University Press (New York, NY), 1991. *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River*, Hill & Wang (New York, NY), 1995. *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos*, University of Nebraska Press (Lincoln, NE), 1983. *Remembering Ahanagan; Storytelling in a Family's Past*, Hill and Wang (New York, NY), 1998. *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America*, W. W. Norton (New York, NY), 2011. The book is clearly written so that the novice can understand what the author is attempting to convey throughout the text; that being, the western peoples desired a certain autonomy from the federal government while readily accepting aid and favors from it. The more the government was required to help, the more the dependency upon the federal government by the inhabitants of the region. The practice began with the American Indian, and to illustrate the straightforward style of White the following is offered from the text: "The Treaty of Medicine Lodge brought great changes, but they were gradual ones. The Comanches and allied Kiowas now had

regular annuities to supplement a subsistence system rendered more precarious than before by the decline of the buffalo. During General Sheridan's campaign against the Cheyennes in 1869, the Comanches and their allies remained on the reservations to escape attacks by soldiers who regarded any Indians found roaming the plains as hostile. Even on the reservation, however, the Comanches still continued to pursue a modified version of their annual cycle on the plains. They hunted buffalo, and they raided Texas. As one chief informed the agent, if the Americans did not want the young Comanche men to raid in Texas, then they should move Texas far away where they could not find it."<sup>1</sup> White makes a statement and follows with an explanation and supporting evidence, in most cases, to shore up his argument, although documentation of his sources is woefully absent. In other cases, where he seems to portray a bias to his subject, he will make an absurd statement without any supporting documentation as if it were truth. For example, when discussing the Mountain Meadows massacre he hints at Brigham Young's complicity in the mass murders with no evidence to support his accusation.<sup>2</sup> The truth of the matter was that Brigham Young sent a letter to the area bishop on September 10, 1857 by special courier with the instructions: "In regard to emigration trains passing through our settlements we must not interfere with them until they are first notified to keep away. You must not meddle with them."<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the letter did not arrive in time to dissuade the plans of Bishop Haight and John D. Lee. In his discussion leading up to the massacre White propels and gives credence to the myth of the Danites by calling them "a band of murderers who supposedly acted under the command of Brigham Young" carrying out the "blood atonement".<sup>4</sup> The Danites were nothing more than body guards for Joseph Smith that had been, for the most part, disbanded by the times the Mormons arrived in Utah.<sup>5</sup> I am not the only one who had some problems with White's *Western History*. Kerwin Klein wrote, "White's work is insightful, but his construction is anachronistic and potentially misleading."<sup>6</sup> However, all the reviews of the work are not negative. Stephen Aron writes, "White has provided the most sweeping interpretation of the casualties of American expansion. Illuminating the extensive role of the federal government in molding the western United States, he has defrocked the cult of individualism."<sup>7</sup> For the most part the book is an enjoyable and captivating read. I realize, that with such an extensive topic, to do justice to each and every aspect of history would be quite impossible. White does a good job, in most cases, of separating fact from myth. Despite the book's shortcomings I would highly recommend White's book to all who would like a primer on the history of the American West.

Sources: 1. Richard White, "It's Your Misfortune and None of my Own": A New History of the American West (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1991) 99. 2. *Ibid.*, 168. 3. Ronald Walker, Richard Turley Jr., and Glen Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press,

2008), 184-85. 4.White, *It's Your Misfortune*, 168. 5.For a complete treatise on the Danites see: Richard Dewey, *Porter Rockwell: A Biography* (New York: Paramount Books, 1986). 6.Kerwin Lee Klein. "Reclaiming the "F" Word, or Being and Becoming Postwestern." *Pacific Historical Review* 65, no. 2 (May 1996): 185 7.Stephen Aron. "Lessons in Conquest: Towards a Greater Western History." *Pacific Historical Review* 63, no. 2 (May 1994): 126.

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